

Body Snatchers: the Hidden Side of the History of Anatomy

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Abstract

From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, anatomical knowledge expanded greatly for human dissections were more and more recognized as essential to medical and surgical training. The need for bodies, especially in private medical schools, increased so much that the bodies legally obtained could not meet the demand. This situation gave rise to underground organizations, known as body snatchers or resurrectionists, which supplied anatomists with bodies which were illegally exhumed from their graves. The lure of money even led some of them to murder people. These malefactors heaped opprobrium on the anatomists who enlisted their services. Notwithstanding their motives, they contributed to the progress of human anatomy.

Introduction

Some years ago, the famous anatomical atlas of Eduard Pernkopf was put in the hot seat by people who claimed that the author, an ardent Nazi, used material obtained from Nazi victims to illustrate his book (Williams, 1988; Israel and Seidelman, 1996). It is not my intention to discuss this assertion: I just want to remind the reader of the fact that this practice unfortunately goes back a very long time, especially in Great Britain. In the last centuries, many private medical schools attracted large number of students from everywhere, including from abroad, because of the reputation of their teachers (Persaud, 1997). The pressing demand for human material exceeded by far the supply that was available, giving rise to an illicit trade of bodies. Some of the most famous anatomists of the last centuries received bodies from grave robbers and body snatchers who were making lots of money. This paper aims at summarizing the reason why many celebrated anatomists associated with these rather undesirable people, at the risk of losing their reputation.

The sad fate of condemned persons

Condemned persons were often used to supply laboratories of anatomy with bodies all around the world. As far back as in 1542, an Act of Parliament permitted the British Company of Barbers and Surgeons to use the bodies of four executed "malefactors" for dissection. Over two centuries later, the Parliament Act of 1752 expanded this practice to

include the body of any criminal executed in London and Middlesex (Persaud, 1997). In the early seventeenth century, the Jena anatomist Werner Rolfinck was famous for having at his disposal the bodies of many executed people. His reputation as a dissector was so widespread that it terrorized all the inhabitants of the region. As a matter of fact: "The terror that the name Rolfinck filled the population with, led poor sinners to make arrangements not to be 'rolfincked'" (Frober, 1996). In Japan, the bodies of condemned people were also used for dissections: in the 1786 "Sanno suke kaibu zu", the illustrators overdid realism to the point of depicting the wound made by the executioner's axe on the anterior aspect of the thigh: the blow had been so strong that the axe sank into the thigh of the condemned man who was executed in a squatting position (Olry and Motomiya, 1996) (figure 1). In Switzerland, Andreas Vesalius dissected the body of Jakob Karrer, a notorious murderer who was beheaded on May 12, 1543 (Olry, 1998). Also in France, the bodies of condemned persons were given to the medical faculties until the late nineteenth century (Chapoutot, 1894). Unfortunately, bodies of condemned persons could not provide for the anatomists' needs: this left the way open to the body snatchers.

Body snatchers: the trade of death

The history of body snatchers was the subject of many historical, biographical and psychological studies (Cohen, 1975; Richardson, 1991; Shultz, 1992; French, 1997). Many gangs were involved in the business: over a period of fifteen

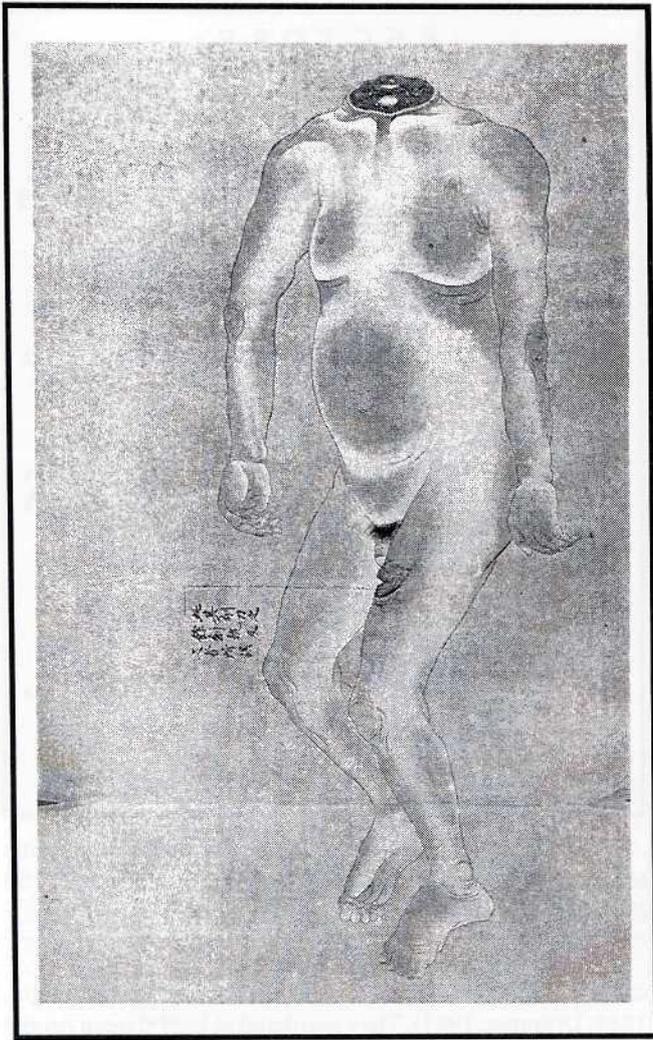


Figure 1. One figure from the Sannosuke-kaibu-zu (1786). The condemned man was in a squatting position for his capital execution; the blow by the executioner was so strong that the axe sank into the ventral aspect of the left thigh after having beheaded the malefactor.

months in 1830-1831, seven gangs were arrested in London (Desmond, 1989). At that time, the London grave robbers were estimated to be about 200 in number (figure 2). Their only fear was the public hostility, and, to a lesser extent, the law: they found their task increasingly difficult and dangerous, and therefore increased the price of their commodity (French, 1997). Some of the most effective grave robbers were able to exhume discreetly about ten bodies during a single night. It was for them the only way to earn so much money so easily.

Duverney, Haller, Hunter, Knox, Cooper and others

Resorting to grave robbery or body snatching was not a marginal phenomenon. According to Lassek (1958), between

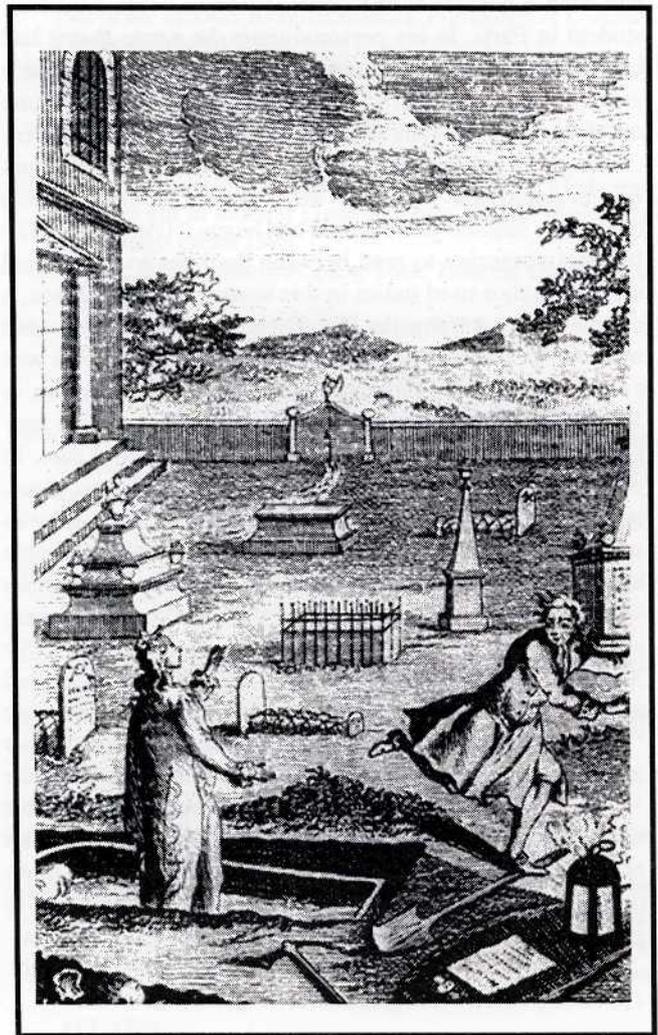


Figure 2. A grave robber who exhumed a prematurely interred person flees in terror (taken from Winslow, 1746).

1500 and 2000 bodies were removed annually by grave robbers from the cemetery known as Bully's Acre in Dublin. Dead bodies were exhumed without distinction because it was very profitable: the famous English writer Laurence Sterne died on March 16, 1678. Short after he was buried, his body was removed by grave robbers and delivered to Cambridge where one of his close relations recognized him in the dissecting room (Wolf-Heidegger and Ceto, 1967).

Many celebrated anatomists were involved in these dealings. Guichard Joseph Du Verney, a professor of anatomy at the Jardin Royal, is famous for his contribution to the anatomy of the organ of hearing (Asherson, 1979). For over thirty years (1682-1716), he purchased bodies from gravediggers of the Clamart cemetery in the outer suburbs of Paris, "much to the alarm of the population which viewed such spectacles with horror" (Gannal, 1893). Albrecht von Haller, one of the most celebrated anatomists of his time,

had been a witness to the trade of bodies while a medical student in Paris. In his personal diary, he wrote that it had been necessary to pay out ten francs to obtain a body from a gravedigger on October 17, 1727 (Hintzsche, 1942). William and John Hunter of the Great Windmill Street School were clients of the grave robbers. In his 1774 masterpiece, William Hunter stated that "the body was *procured* (author's italics) before any sensible putrefaction had begun" (Persaud, 1997). It is not necessary to read between the lines to understand why the author used italics in this sentence. Robert Knox, a pivotal figure among the Edinburgh anatomists, was also involved in the trade of resurrectionists. However, he was exonerated by the Edinburgh columnist Lord Cockburn in 1856: "All our anatomists incurred a most unjust and a very alarming, though not an unnatural odium; Dr. Knox, in particular, against whom not only the anger of the populace, but the condemnation of more intelligent persons was specially directed. But tried in reference to the invariable and the necessary practice of the profession, our anatomists were spotlessly correct, and Knox the most correct of them all" (Lonsdale, 1870). In the mid-nineteenth century, Sir Astley Cooper, a very skillful surgeon and dedicated anatomist, obtained illegally some of the bodies he dissected: "Under the encouragement of Sir Astley Cooper and other teachers, who paid high prices for anatomical material, the violation of graves in or near London became a horrible trade" (Ball, 1928). Joseph Constantine Carpue, the founder of the Dean Street Anatomical School, Charles Bell and many others may add to the list of anatomists who turned to graverobbers or to the body snatchers in the last centuries.

The public's indignation

In the eighteenth century, dissections were conducted not only for medical students, but also sometimes for the public which enjoyed attending human dissections (figure 3). However, the public was outraged by the body snatchers and the grave robbers who removed bodies from their grave: all the more frightening since many people had a phobia about untimely burials (Olry, 1996). In all parts of Great Britain, dissecting rooms were burnt down. In Philadelphia, the opening of an anatomical theatre created great alarm among some of the citizens, and the professor of anatomy and surgery William Shippen had to flee his home more than once in order to avoid bodily harm (Persaud, 1997). In New York City, a riotous mob stormed the New York Hospital for the same reasons, and the "students were confined in the common prison for security against the wild passions of the populace" (Thacher, 1828; cited in Persaud, 1997).

Escalation of horror: Burke and Hare

In the early nineteenth century, William Burke and his companion William Hare were the actors of the "blackest

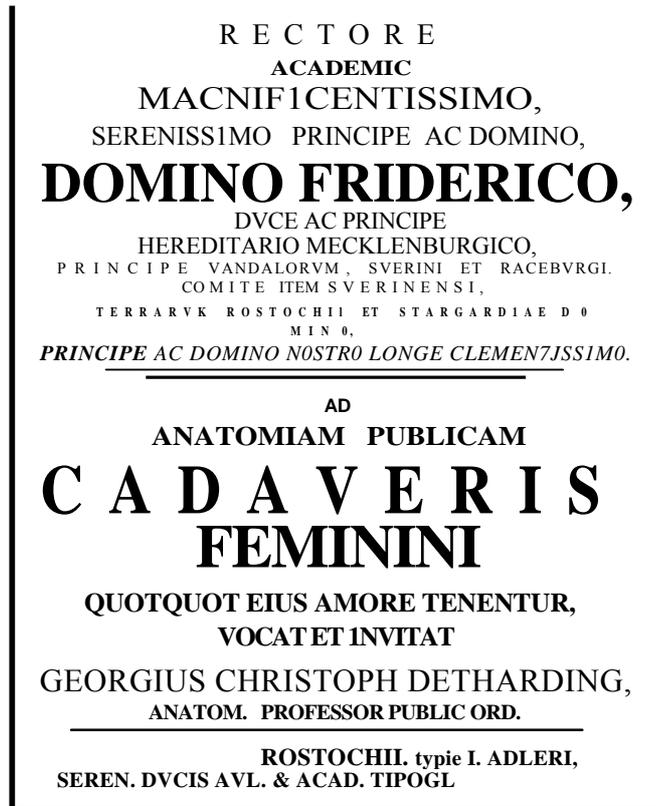


Figure 3. Invitation to the last public human dissection to be conducted at the Rostock University in 1753 (Schumacher and Wischhusen, 1970, p. 177).

chapter in the black annals of body snatching" (MacGregor, 1884; Drimmer, 1981). They murdered at least sixteen people to supply anatomists with human bodies. The last of these bodies, those of an old woman named Docherty, was discovered in Robert Knox's dissecting rooms by the authorities. In his confession, Burke described how they carried out their heinous murders: "After they ceased crying and making resistance, we left them to die of themselves, but their bodies would often move afterwards, and for some time they would heave long breathings before life went out" (Persaud, 1997).

William Burke was hanged on January 28, 1829, in the presence of a cheering crowd estimated at 30,000 people (figure 4). His body was then dissected by Alexander Monro Tertius who subsequently lectured on his skull and brain from the phrenological point of view (Wright-St. Clair, 1964). His companion William Hare escaped the gallows and returned to his native country (Ireland).

Conclusion

Body snatchers were the result of an inadequacy between



Figure 4. William Burke in his prison cell (Persaud, 1997, p. 181).

the ever growing need for human bodies for dissection, and the impossibility of legally supplying anatomists with enough bodies. Human bodies had a scientific value for anatomists, and a market value for body snatchers: there was something in it for everybody. Without the bodies, which were illegally obtained through grave robbers, the work of many anatomists would not have been possible. The Anatomy Act of 1832 provided an adequate supply of bodies for the teaching of anatomy, gradually putting out of business resurrectionists (Poison and Marshall, 1975): the end stooped to justify the means...

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